



Illinois Heritage

A publication of The Illinois State Historical Society

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May-June 2024



2024 Best of Illinois History Awards

See story starting on page 29

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ISHS advisory board member Libby Tronnes presents Best of Illinois History Awards to McKenna Servis, Emily Lyons, Phil Dixon, and Darcel Rockett and Tina Akouris. Photos by William Furry.

To our readers:

The 2024 Best of Illinois History Awards were presented April 20 at the Hoogland Center for the Arts in Springfield and attended by more than 130 award recipients and their guests. Authors and exhibitors, students, teachers, and lifetime achievers took advantage of the excellent weather to converge in the capital city to discover the wonders of Illinois history as interpreted by our award winners. The sorry of this year's honorees begins on page 29.

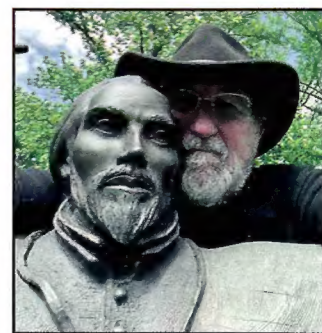
Our regular writers for *Illinois Heritage* have contributed articles on feminist Betty Friedan, an important Illinois writer from Peoria, the "White Rabbit" artists who assisted sculptor Lorado Taft in constructing distinctive art for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, and contributors Tim Draper and Bess Kershnik guide us along Prairie footpaths in Lee and Ogle counties. In addition, we celebrate the dedication of a new marker in Naperville commemorating a Potawatomi

village eradicated after the Black Hawk War. We also celebrate the reopening of the Grand Army of the Republic Museum,

recently removed from Springfield and reopened at the General John A. Logan Museum in Murphysboro.

In this issue, we bid farewell to Leah Joy Axelrod and David W. Scott, two remarkable ISHS presidents who served our organization with distinction. Both passed away in the first three months of 2024. We will miss their friendly presence among us but we will never forget their leadership and dedication to our Illinois State Historical Society. Thank you, thank you.

William Furry
Executive Director



Treasures from the museum

By Genevieve Alea Hester

The joke goes: "It's not hoarding if your stuff is cool!" We have lots of cool things in the Perry County Jail Museum in Pinckneyville. Maybe too many things, but then again, we're proud to protect and share this history with locals and visitors alike.



At first glance, it resembles any other handmade chest from the 1940s. However, it's much more than that. It's a chest that holds one World War Two sergeant's life's story, a story which would give me comfort in one of the darkest moments in my life.

In January of 2020, I started planning exhibits for the Perry County Jail Museum. Then, in mid-March, COVID ruined my exhibit plans. Nevertheless, I decided to honor a few Perry County soldiers who were killed or missing in action for Memorial Day online. My inspiration arose from the Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young song, "Daylight Again." The ending lyrics are: "Find the cost of freedom buried in the ground? Mother Earth will swallow you, lay your body down." Upon hearing this, I realized that I had to honor as many of those soldiers as I could. Furthermore, I would name the exhibit: "Find the Cost of Freedom."

While at the museum looking for a veteran's photo for the exhibit, I happened upon the chest. Instead of finding the picture, I found a chest packed full of items which belonged to Sgt. Bernard Franklin Reynolds. I was intrigued. I started unpacking the chest and reading the letters inside. In that moment, I unknowingly gained a new family member who would change my life in ways I never imagined.

Sgt. Bernard Franklin Reynolds was born on July 29th 1917 in Johnston City, Illinois to Rufus Guy and Florence nee Trinkle Reynolds. His family eventually moved to Indiana. On Christmas Eve 1927 his beloved mother Florence passed away.

After graduating from high school in Indiana, Bernard landed in Pinckneyville, where he had family. He



Rubylee and Bernard Reynolds in Pinckneyville 1942

Photos courtesy Jason Hill Photography of Du Quoin.

started working at the Pyramid Coal Mines as a coal sorter and a truck driver.

He met, and instantly fell in love with, Pinckneyville native Rubylee Beck. In 1941, Bernard was drafted into the Army. He bounced from base to base in the United States. Still, Rubylee was always on his mind. They frequently wrote each other beautiful love letters. Bernard's handwriting was impeccable. Bernard ended each one with: "I love you more than anything else in this world, I worship you. Love your 'One.'"

Bernard and Rubylee married on July 5, 1942 after the Zion Lutheran Church service in Pinckneyville. Bernard left for camp by 1pm after the brief reception. They visited each other often. In a short newspaper clipping, Rubylee said: "I'd much rather stay at home thinking about my BF on the weekend nights than go out dancing."

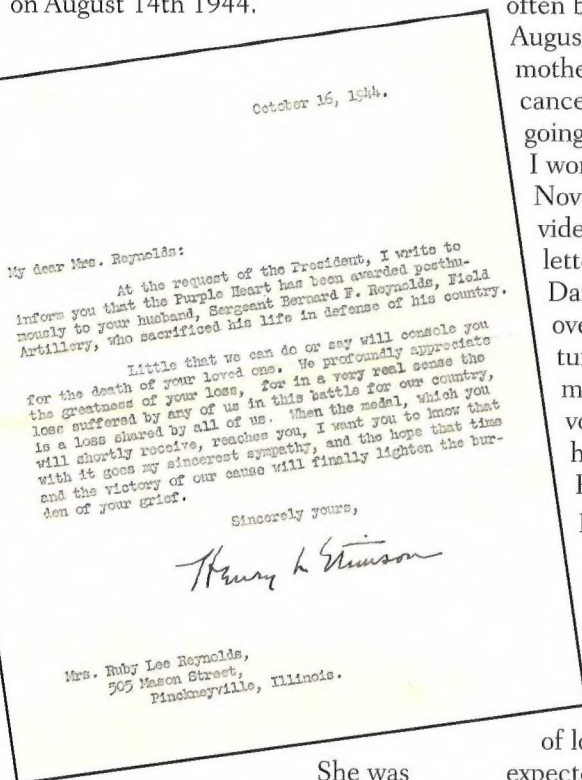
In 1944, Bernard was sent to England and then to France, joining



Bernard's Purple Heart, wedding ring picture of the couple, surrounded by his letters he wrote Rubylee.

the push through Normandy. Early in the morning on July 31st, Sgt. Reynolds was killed. Two days after his 27th birthday. Due to slow communication, Rubylee didn't find out until two weeks later. Every day, she walked to the post office in Pinckneyville, hoping for a big bundle of mail from her "One."

She was devastated when the telegram reporting Bernard's death arrived on August 14th 1944.



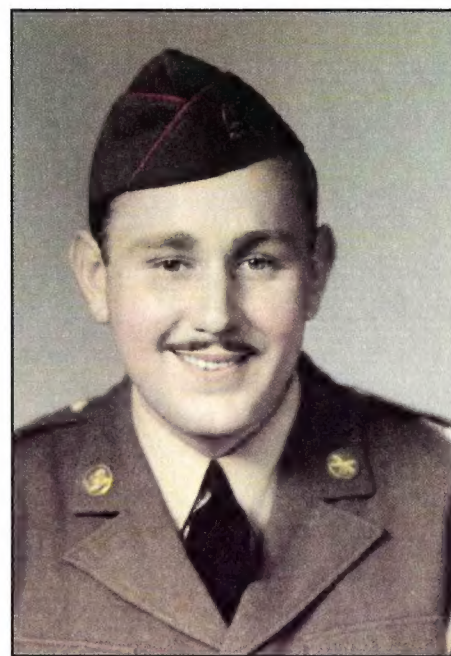
She was desperate for answers on how Bernard was killed. In October of 1944, Rubylee received a letter from Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, informing her that Bernard received the Purple Heart posthumously.

Despite this, no details on BF's death emerged. She finally wrote the Chaplain for Bernard's company. When Chaplain Philips wrote back, he explained that he was there when Bernard was killed. It was in the early morning of July 31st 1944. The men were sleeping in their foxholes when a German bomb exploded, killing Bernard instantly. He apologized for not writing sooner because there was an order prohibiting him for doing so. Bernard was buried in the La Comb cemetery in Normandy France. His body was moved to his final resting place in the Normandy American Cemetery, in Normandy France in the 1950s.

Rubylee eventually moved on with her life. She remarried, had a child, and lived in Pinckneyville until her death in 2005. For years, she saved over 200 letters and Bernard's personal items in the cedar chest. Her son donated it to the museum, where it sat for fifteen years until I rediscovered it.

For the next several months, my mother and I visited BF and Rubylee often by reading their letters. In August of 2020, we discovered my mother, Nancy L. Smith - Hester, had cancer. While my mother was undergoing treatment, I cared for her while I worked on this collection. During November of 2020, I made short videos on Facebook reading the letters. Retired Sargent 1st class Darren M. Hiller US Army voiced over as BF, with Bernard's pictures in the background. Other men from the Perry County area voiced the official letters from high-ranking officials sent to Rubylee in the wake of BF's passing. In mid-February of 2021, after a short, intense battle, my mother passed away.

Later that year, I took my children to Pinckneyville's public park where a monument stands with the names of local KIA/ MIA soldiers. I expected to see Bernard's name, but it wasn't there. In November of 2021, I made a passionate plea to the City



Bernard Reynolds age 24 in 1942

Council during a meeting, with the local paper in attendance, to inscribe BF's name on the stone. I provided them with Bernard's draft card and they agreed, making it a reality by Spring 2022.

In April of 2023, a local charity promoted a fundraiser selling banners honoring veterans to be displayed around the Pinckneyville Square. I didn't choose any of my ancestors; I chose my friend and adopted family member, Bernard. His picture was displayed proudly on the square for six months.



The handmade chest that houses Bernard's life story, propped up next to it, Army issued bedroll with his name on it.

I leave you with the immortal words of Lincoln that Senator Scott Lucas wrote Rubylee.

"I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost. And the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

Rubylee Reynolds Cucumber Salad

2 cucumbers, peeled and thinly sliced
1 cup sour cream
1 tablespoon onion flakes
1-1/2 tablespoons white vinegar
1/4 teaspoon salt
Black pepper to taste

Mix together and chill for 2 hours.

Bernard wrote to Rubylee while in France, how he looked forward coming home to her. They would have a big picnic lakeside and he would eat a big serving of her Cucumber Salad.

Genevieve Hester works at the Perry County Jail Museum.

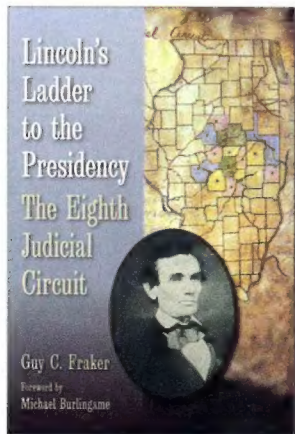


Bernard Reynolds age 23 in 1941, picture taken in St. Louis MO.

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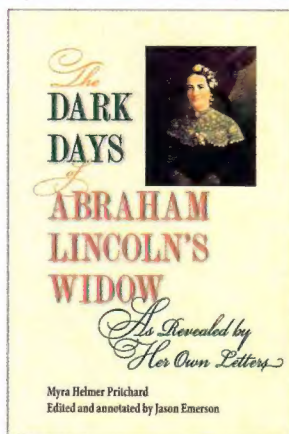
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